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THE EVOLUTION OF METRO

William J. Murin

Consortium of Universities
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THE EVOLUTION OF METRO

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Project Summary:

This research, part of a larger effort, examines the evolution of the Washington, D. C. area subway system (METRO) from early legislation in the 1950's through adoption late in 1969. The specific purpose of the evolution narrative is to provide a common framework of understanding for the larger effort and to present the incremental nature of the decision-making process relevant to the system's planning.

The entire effort titled Transportation Planning and Politics in the National Capital will examine the policy implications of the values of the various participants in the METRO planning process. The perspective will be from that of an inner-city resident and his service needs to work, shopping, medical services, etc.

The official birth of the METRO system, the National Capital region's answer to rail rapid transit, came on December 9, 1969, when President Richard M. Nixon signed legislation authorizing Federal participation in a 98 mile regional system, to the extent of $ 1.147 billion over a ten year period. This single act was preceded by almost a quarter of a century of planning and political decisions which often changed the scope and nature of the system. This chapter seeks to trace the evolution of METRO from 1952 through its approval late in 1969.

The National Capital Planning Act of 1952 to the Mass Transportation Survey: 1952-1959

In 1952, the National Capital Planning Act directed the National Capital Planning Commission(NCPC) and the National Capital Regional Planning Council(NCRPC) to prepare comprehensive plans for land use, major thoroughfares, and the movement of people and goods in the region.

The transportation portion of the mandate was realized in the Second Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1955[1] which provided funds for the NCPC and NCRPC to "jointly conduct a survey of the present and future mass transportation needs of the National Capital region . . . and to report their findings and recommendations to the President, ..."[2]

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[1] Second Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1955, 69 Stat. 33(1961).

[2] Ibid.

As the survey progressed, a Joint Steering Committee appointed by the NCPC and NCRPC to conduct the survey, authorized the release of of a series of supporting documents compiled by consultants under contract to the Committee. In June, 1955, the Committee recommended that the initial work of the survey should be the preparation of a general development plan for the region as a basis for the mass transportation plan.[1] Soon after, a $ 19,000 contract was entered into with the Council for Economic and Industry Research(CEIR) for a limited economic base study comprehensive enough in scope to be used to project population growth, employment and land use within the region for 1965 and 1980.

While the studies continued, the Congress in 1957 created a Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems(JCWMP), under the chairmanship of Senator Alan Bible. This committee conducted a comprehensive survey of metropolitan problems apart from the transportation activities of the NCPC and NCRPC, investigating such areas as water supply, sewage disposal, land use, economic development, intergovernmental relations, and transportation problems.

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[1] National Capital Planning Commission and National Capital Regional Planning Council, Joint Committee on Programs and Procedures, June 16, 1955.

The Committee launched an intensive inquiry into the status and prospects of the mass transportation survey with the initial results of this inquiry being an April, 1958, staff report "Metropolitan Transportation" by Arthur Lazarus.[1]

The report was an analysis of all that had gone on in the survey, and pointed out both the accomplishments and inadequacies of the reports thus far published. Lazarus found that the whole orientation of the survey was determined by its location in the two general planning agencies, and that this perspective did not allow for much participation by existing transportation interests, by the business community, banking and investment interests, and by many other people who would necessarily be involved if any specific action steps were going to be taken.[2] Thus he suggested that further efforts were needed to:

1) investigate the motivations of potential mass transit users in an auto-dominant community;
2) explore the technology of new modes of transportation;
3) investigate the interaction between land use and transit design;
4) secure the cooperation of Congress, Maryland and Virginia officials, and District representatives;
5) secure the cooperation of transit operators, parking agencies, planning agencies, and business and financial interests.[3]

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[1] U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems, Metropolitan Transportation, by Arthur Lazarus, Joint Committee Print(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1958).

[2] In view of the MTS recommended transit system, this conclusion becomes extremely important.

[3] Lazarus, Metropolitan Transportation, p. 27.

In January, 1959, three more reports, which ultimately were to form the core of the entire transportation program, were issued by the Joint Steering Committee. The first report, by Wilbur Smith and Associates was a traffic engineering study which undertook to forecast metropolitan travel volumes in 1965 and 1980, trip time, and mode selection.[1]

The second report, a civil engineering study by DeLeuw, Cather & Co. of Chicago, was the single most important contract let by the Joint Steering Committee.[2] The contract defined the duties of the engineers as: providing support for the preliminary plans of the mass transportation survey staff; offering suggestions for supplementing, combining, amending, or eliminating aspects of survey staff plans; focusing on unreal or unattainable staff expectations; developing an estimated bill for construction and financing; but not developing a fully articulated plan or system.[3]

The report presented costs and revenues for several alternative transportation systems in accordance with certain hypotheses developed by the Joint Steering Committee.

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[1] Wilbur Smith and Associates, Mass Transportation Survey, Traffic Engineering Study (New Haven, Conn., January, 5, 1959).

[2] Lazarus, Metropolitan Transportation, p. 16.

[3] Ibid.

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The first alternate, an auto dominant system, consisted of an extensive network of freeways, parkways, and aterial streets along with large scale downtown parking facilities on the assumption that a steadily increasing proportion of people would use their private automobiles to travel downtown. Public transportation would consist of buses sharing streets wiht other automotive traffic. An express bus system, consisting of high-speed buses making few stops and traveling on freeways, parkways, and their own rights-of-way, was the second alternative. Local buses would supplement the express service and highways and parking facilities would be less than in the auto plan. The third possibility was a rail dominant plan with local buses, highways, and parking facilities assuming much the same character as under the express bus plan. A fourth plan, providing for the optimum integration of all modes of transportation, was developed by DeLeuw, Cather, and eventually became the "recommended system."

The third support study was the Preliminary Financial and Organizational Report of the Institute for Public Administration(IPA). It is interesting to note that this was the only one of the support studies not published by the Joint Steering Committee. Although the Committee cited lack of funds as the reason, investigation of the proceedings of the Committee indicates that they disagreed with certain alternative plans put forth by IPA and did not want these alternatives made public.

The Institute proposed the creation of a transportation organization closely related to an effective regional planning agency, embracing all forms of transportation, and being responsible to the governing officials of the region.[1]

Finally, in July of 1959, the long awaited Transportation Plan for the National Capital Region[2] made its public appearance. The Plan made four recommendations to meet the Washington area's transportation needs between 1960 and 1980.

1) construction of a network of freeways on which people could travel quickly between any two points in the region even at hours when traffic is heaviest;
2) high speed bus service leading to downtown along freeways and parkways, and the creation of a rail transit system to serve downtown and extending outward to Silver Spring, Bethesda, Alexandria, and Anacostia;
3) improved arterial streets and highways to carry automotive traffic not carried by the freeways; and
4) expanded and improved local transit service on arterial and local streets to carry passengers not served by new bus and rail facilities.[3]

The recommended system consisted of 33 miles of rail rapid transit, 66 miles of express bus routes, and parking facilities for the rail and bus routes all totaling $ 564 million.

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[1] Robert L. Banks, "The Legislative Origins of the National Capital Transportation Agency, Discussion paper for the NCTA Conference, (Annapolis, Md., October, 1961).

[2] U.S. National Capital Planning Commission and U.S. National Capital Regional Planning Council, Transportation Plan for the National Capital Region: The Mass Transportation Survey Report-1959 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, July 1, 1959).

[3] Ibid., p. 1.

The freeway portion of the plan called for 329 miles of new freeways and expressways,[1] of which 81 were in existence, costing $ 1.8 billion, and $ 119 million worth of downtown parking facilities. Total cost of the entire system was estimated at almost $ 2.5 billion.[2]

Transportation Plan for the National Capital Region to the "Whitener Plan": 1959-1963

Media

Immediate reaction to the publication of the Mass Transportation Survey(MTS) came from the Washington D.C. newspapers, and for the most part was favorable. In a July 12, 1959 editorial, the Sunday Star said:

> . . . the Report makes a great number of assumptions about the willingness and capability of both the Federal and local governments to perform certain functions. These assumptions involve policy decisions that will not be reached easily or quickly. . . . The transportation report . . . should be regarded as a starting point rather then as a final product. Accepted this way, it can be an invaluable document.[3]

The Washington Post in its editorial on the same day agreed with the Star and added that as a starting point the Report was "intelligent, balanced, and thoroughgoing."[4]

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[1] It might be noted that the original auto dominant plan of DeLeuw, Cather called for 305 miles of freeways. Thus the recommended plan had 24 miles of freeway more than the original auto dominant plan.

[2] U.S. NCPC and NCRPC, MTS Report, pp. 4 and 7.

[3] Editorial, Sunday Star, July 12, 1959.

[4] Editorial, Washington Post and Times Herald, July 12, 1959.

As to the actual scope and nature of the plan, the Post had some reservations proceeding directly from the part of the plan recommending that the transportation system should consist of freeways "on which people can travel quickly between any two parts of the region, even at hours when traffic is heaviest."[1] The editorial concluded that:

> in all humility before the imponderables an uncontrollables of the business of urban life and growth, we feel compelled to ask, what kind of city planning is this ?
>
> The idea that the urban resident and taxpayer really desires or is willing to pay for the fluidity of movement which the report seems to envisage strikes us as a rather shallow judgement.
>
> Is it the business of the general public to provide such facilities for the minority who deliberately choose to live at great distances from their place of employment? . . . It does not follow that the most whimsical desires of every citizen on this matter should be justified by a very costly transportation system.[2]

In October, the Post editorially objected to the desires of some highway enthusiasts who wanted to "turn Washington into concrete."[3]

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[1] U.S. NCPC and NCRPC, MTS Report, p. 1.

[2] Editorial, Washington Post and Times Herald, July 12, 1959.

[3] Editorial, Washington Post and Times Herald, October 12, 1959.

The editorial pointed out:

> if some road enthusiasts had their way, the District would soon resemble nothing so much as an enormous airport apron. Parks, residences, nothing is sacred in the march of "progress" that has as its ostensibly highest aim the building of universal monuments to the automobile civilization. To what purpose this bringing of more and more cars into the city to hurry up and wait ? . . . Unless Washington planners and officials and community leaders come together on a project that is both desirable and possible and then join in energetic endeavor to achieve it, the happy highwaymen will take over by default. [1]

Congress

The Joint Committee under Senator Bible began a lengthy series of hearings on the MTS plan. From the hearings it seemed apparent, 1) that the appeal of a rail transit system had been underestimated in the study and, 2) that there was great local opposition to the effect new highways would have upon the community.

The list of witnesses testifying in favor of the rail portion of the plan was impressive, overwhelming, and had a significant impact on subsequent congressional decisions. The following statements are typical of those given at the hearings:

> "We should like to stress the importance of giving the highest priority to the development of the proposed rail transit facilities to reduce travel time and avoid unnecessary costs." Elmer B. Statts, Deputy Director, Bureau of the Budget, for the Administration. [2]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems, Transportation Plan for the National Capital Region, Hearings, before the Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems, Congress of the United States, 86th Cong., 1st Sess., 1959, p. 14.

"I think highways have great use, but I believe that the program we are talking about here overemphasizes these superhighways into the heart of Washington."-- Roy W. Johnson, Chairman, American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods(ACTION).

"The survey is basically statistical, and if its recommendations are fully carried out, it will result in a mechanical situation without beauty, peace, or pollution-free air."-- Grosvenor Chapman, Washington Metropolitan Chapter, American Institute of Architects.[1]

As a result of these hearings, the Bureau of the Budget, acting for the President, and conculting with state and local governments prepared legislation to establish the transportation agency called for in the 1959 plan. This legislation was enacted as the National Capital Transportation Act of 1960.[2] The National Capital Transportation Agency(NCTA) created by the act was directed by Congress to evaluate the 1959 plan, to consider alternatives to the plan that might be less costly to the city, to coordinate transportation planning in the region, and to report its findings to the President no later than November 1, 1962. Congress had stated as a matter of policy that there should be planning on a regional basis of a unified system of freeways, parkways, express transit, and other major transportation facilities.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 31 and 128.

[2] National Capital Transportation Act of 1960, 74 Stat. 537(1960), 40 U.S.C.A. 651(1969).

[3] Ibid., sec. 102, 74 Stat. 537(1960), 40 U.S.C.A. 651(1969).

Congress also directed the NCTA to prepare a Transit Development Program as a prelude to the construction of transportation facilities,[1] and empowered the Agency, subject to congressional approval, to construct and provide for the operation of mass transit facilities.[2]

The Transit Development Program was to consist of a plan indicating the general location of transit facilities to be developed by the NCTA; a timetable for the construction of those facilities; and financial reports showing costs, revenues, and benefits of the proposed system.[3] In developing a program, Congress required the Agency to give special attention to expanding the use of existing facilities and services, and to early development of a subway from Union Station to the principal employment centers in the District which would be capable of being extended to serve other parts of the region.[4]

Legislative Intent

The record of the 1960 act clearly shows congressional effort to gauge community sentiment about metropolitan transportation, and that it found considerable public support for rail rapid transit.

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[1] Ibid., sec 204(a), 74 Stat. 539(1960), 40 U.S.C.A. 664(1969).

[2] Ibid., sec 204(c), 74 Stat. 540(1960), 40 U.S.C.A. 664(1969).

[3] Ibid., sec 204(b)(1)&(2), 74 Stat.539(1960), 40 U.S.C.A. 664(1969).

[4] Ibid., sec 204, 74 Stat. 537(1960), 40 U.S.C.A. 664(1969).

At the same time, Congress decided that the costs of the system should be borne by those using the facilities or benefitting from the construction. The Senate District of Columbia Committee report specifically stated that the system must be designed so that it did not require or need continued Federal financing.[1] As will be shown later, this requirement of financial self-sufficiency was a major factor in the ultimate design and shape of the system.

The record also shows that Congress did not look at the transportation plan as a finished document but rather as a starting point. For this reason they provided for more detailed studies in the Transit Development Plan.[2] At the same time, by giving the NCTA the power to acquire or construct transit facilities,[3] Congress indicated that the need for more studies was no substitute for action, especially where action was necessary for the accomplishment of long range goals.[4]

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[1] U.S. Congress, Senate, Transportation for the National Capital Region, S. Rept. 1631 To Accompany H.R. 11135, 86th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1960, p. 11.

[2] Ibid.

[3] National Capital Transportation Act of 1960, sec 205(a)(1), 74 Stat. 541-542, 40 U.S.C.A. 665.

[4] Senate, Transportation for the National Capital Region, S. Rept. 1631, p. 5.

Work went on in earnest at the NCTA during the next eighteen months. From April, 1961, to November, 1962, the study staff, with the assistance of several outside consultants, completed the review of the 1959 plan and prepared its own report. But during this time the NCTA conferred little with other planning, citizen, or business groups, so that when the report and its recommendations were made public, it was the first time that many local groups had seen it.

In terms of importance for the shape of a transit system, the major finding of the NCTA report was that the region's transportation crisis was in part due to its rapidly growing population and in part due to governmental policies which encouraged suburban growth.

The NCTA also found that the downtown area would continue to remain the largest single employment area in the region with an increasing number of trips to and through downtown.[1] These findings prompted a call for increasing the 33 miles or rail transit in the 1959 plan to 83 miles, and cutting the size of the freeway program from 410 to 255 miles.[2]

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[1] National Capital Transportation Agency, Transportation in the National Capital Region, Finance and Organization (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 1.

[2] The 1959 plan called for 329 miles of new freeways in addition to the 81 in existence, while the 1962 plan recommended 50 new freeway miles in addition to 205 under construction or in existence.

The "heart" of the rail rapid transit system was to be a 19 mile subway network so routed that eight of every ten downtown workers would be within a five minute walk of a subway station.[1] The pattern of the downtown system was guided by the existing and potential development of the downtown area and was designed to provide "convenient circulation between all major concentrations of downtown activity,"[2] including federal, commercial, and office sites.

However, aware of the congressional mandate that the system pay for itself and not require continuous Federal funding, the report emphatically stated that:

> the proposed regional rapid transit system can pay all operating expenses and its capital costs as well. It can do so because the region has a heavily occupied downtown area and a high fare structure and because projected use of railroad rights-of-way and freeway medians will reduce the capital outlay required.[3]

In the early days of developing a transit plan that would best meet the needs of the region, the NCTA was primarily concerned with how to provide good service throughout downtown. A principal reason for this concern was that Congress had specifically directed the Agency to consider a downtown subway, but also because in the forseeable future downtown Washington, D.C. would continue to be the largest single employment center in the region.

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[1] NCTA, Transportation in the National Capital, pp. xiv and 31.

[2] Ibid., p. 32.

[3] Ibid., p. 47.

The primary goal of the downtown lines was to place stations(service) as close to as many jobs as possible; qualified by the need to keep expensive in-town subway construction to a minimum and the desire for high speed service. The secondary goal of the downtown lines was to serve the offpeak traveler.[1]

In justifying its plan, the NCTA claimed the following advantages over the 1959 MTS study:

1) the MTS plan would not provide satisfactory service to such rapidly growing areas as Prince Georges, Arlington, and Fairfax Counties. NCTA felt that projected traffic volumes justified rail service to these areas while the 1959 plan provided them with express bus service;

2) capital outlays for the combined highway-transit system would be $ 367 million less under the NCTA plan;

3) annual operating costs for the highways under the NCTA plan would be $ 2.5 million as opposed to $ 5.1 million under MTS;

4) fewer people, 540, would be displaced in the District of Columbia under the 1962 plan than under the MTS proposal, 33,000; and

5) taxable land taken by the transit system would be almost 75 per cent less under the NCTA plan; $ 500,000 as compared to $ 1.9 million.[2]

On May 27, 1963, the NCTA program with strong presidential endorsement was sent to the Congress, along with legislation authorizing construction of the facilities called for in the plan.

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[1] National Capital Transportation Agency, Appendix to the November, 1962 Report to the President, Volume V, "System Planning" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pp. 97-98.

[2] NCTA, Transportation in the National Capital, pp. 19-24.

In July, fifty-four witnesses, including representatives of Federal, state, and local governments, planning agencies, business and civic groups, private transit companies, and a number of private citizens, testified at seven days of hearings on the plan. In addition, a number of outside consultant studies were available to the committee covering engineering, route locations, rights-of-way acquisition, analysis of alternate transportation systems, studies of commuter attitudes toward rail rapid transit, traffic forecasts, and operating costs and revenue estimates.

The hearings pointed out several interesting and potentially volatile differences over the NCTA plan. On one hand, it was clear that Federal, state, and local officials, most planning groups, and the public at large supported the plan. As pointed out by the House District of Columbia Committee, "the public regards the need for a system of rapid rail transit as a matter of the greatest urgency both to meet the volume of traffic and to maintain the beauty of the Capital."[1]

At the other extreme were the highway proponents. In its report, the NCTA had recommended the construction of certain freeways and highways which curtailed and revised highway plans advocated by road user groups.

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[1] U.S. Congress, House, Transit Development Program for the National Capital Region, H. Rept. 1005 To Accompany H.R. 8929, 88th Cong., 1st Sess., 1963, p. 7.

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At the hearings the NCTA recommendations were subjected to strong attack and became one of the focal points of opposition to the transit system. In addition, President Kennedy in his message to Congress supporting the NCTA plan called for a reevaluation of certain controversial highway projects and asked for a special study of the highway projects.[1] The resulting review stopped most of the interstate highway projects in the District and further divided the interested groups into highway and subway forces.

At this point the highway user groups got involved. Their position was summarized in the following quote from The Highway User:

> In addition to the importance of the suspended highway projects in the Nation's Capital from the standpoint of representing a broken link in the Interstate System, the Washington controversy has far-reaching implications for still another reason.
>
> In at least one of the publications of the National Capital Transportation Agency appeared this paragraph:
>
> ' The Nation's Capital, because of its unique relationship to the country, can well be considered a model area. The mass transportation system of this area will have the same character. It is imperative that what is done . . . must be done well. The 212 metropolitan areas of this country will look upon the National Capital Transportation Agency and its work as a model from which they can draw knowledge to help them in their growing problems of mass transportation.'[2]

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[1] Letter from President John F. Kennedy to Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson(President of the Senate) and Speaker of the House of Representatives Jhon McCormack, May 27, 1963.

[2] Quoted from Michael Lash, "Case Study: Conflict in Rapid Transit Planning," in Urban Mass Tansit Planning, Wolfgang S. Homburger(ed.) (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California, Institute of Transportation and Traffic Engineering, 1967), p. 180.

> Highway users feel that the inference to be drawn from this is obvious: that the campaign to supplant freeways with subways in Washington is the opening gun in what could lead to a national movement to slow down or curtail the highway program.[1]

Other significant opposition came from the bus companies operating in the region. Representatives of D.C. Transit, the area's largest bus company, A.B.& W., and W.M.A. bus companies argued that bus service could equal or surpass the recommended rail system's service, would be more flexible, and provide better service. Similar to their testimony at earlier hearings, they supported additional freeways and highways with reserved bus lanes. D.C. transit pointed to the legislation passed by Congress in 1956[2] giving that company exclusive right to operate public transportation in Washington, D.C., and concluded that it also had similar privileges relative to the proposed rail system. Finally, the American Automobile Association and the Bureau of Public Roads testified against the plan. It thus became evident at the hearings that the singificant opposition to the rail plan came from highway users and their supporting groups.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] U.S. Congress, House, Mass Transportation in the District of Columbia, H. Rept. 2751 To Accompany S. 3073, 84th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1956, p. 2. Section 3 of the bill states "no competitive street railway or bus line . . . for the transportation of passengers of the character of which runs over a fixed route on a fixed schedule, shall be established to operate in the District of Columbia. . . ."

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Between July and November, 1963, a great deal of mystery surrounded the transit program, as it was not until December that the House Committee filed it report on the bill-- in the form of a completely new bill.[1] From the hearings it appears that members of the Committee had reservations about the practicability and viability of the 83 mile system; especially as it related to the system's ability to generate enough patronage to be self-supporting. At any rate, in a supplement to the July hearings a new bill, H.R. 8929, introduced by Rep. Basil Whitener(D-NC) was made public.

The Whitener bill authorized the NCTA to construct a 23.3 mile subway rail rapid transit system largely within the confines of the District of Columbia, but extending to such suburban areas as Woodside(Maryland), the Pentagon, and Rosslyn(Arlington County). The bill also authorized creation of a commuter rail line from Union Station at the Capital to Bowie, Maryland, along the Pennsylvania Railroad right-of-way. Despite a decrease in rail coverage of almost 72 per cent(83 to 23.3 miles), the estimated cost of the smaller system decreased by only 49 per cent($ 793 million to $ 400.6 million). This was due largely to the elimination of the lower cost suburban routes.

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[1] U.S. Congress, House, Transit Development Program for the National Capital Region, H. Rept. 1005 To Accompany H.R. 8929, 88th Cong., 1st Sess., 1963.

The justifying their proposal, the Committee noted that in addition to a large amount of public support for the NCTA system, there were also serious uncertainities in the minds of some suburban jurisdictions as to the precise location of rail lines outside the District of Columbia. Therefore, following discussions with NCTA representatives, the subcommittee decided that the most politic procedure at that point was to secure approval of an abbreviated portion of the system mainly within the District.[1]

The National Capital region was still not destined to get rail rapid transit, for on December 9, 1963, the House of Representatives voted 278-76 to recommit the bill to committee.[2] Analysis of the floor debate reveals that battle lines were drawn over benefits to be realized from the system versus certain inadequacies in the legislation. System proponents talked about preservation of the aesthetic values of the city from further despoilation by the automobile, and regional growth; while opponents concentrated on the lack of protection given to labor, its advocacy of public ownership and operation of the system, and the apparent lack of a ceiling on Federal spending for the system.

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[1] Ibid., p. 7.

[2] U.S. Congress, House, 88th Cong., 1st Sess., December 9, 1963, Congressional Record, CIX, 23872.

The Washington Post attempted to explain the defeat in a December 11 editorial:

> Mr. Stolzenbach(NCTA Administrator) committed three errors of political judgement. He believed that he could build the subway only by vehemently attacking the (freeway). He believed that he could build the subway only if revenue estimates promised to pay the whole cost; the figures were demonstrably incredible. He believed that he could build the subway only by refusing to answer questions, however legitimate. He offered no reassurance to the bus companies that he proposed to displace, or to their employees.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . . The vote in the House was a sharp and explicit personal repudiation of Mr. Stolzenbach. . . . He can now serve the city best by resigning. He is so widely distrusted that it is doubtful if any bill can succedd while he retains office. A new administrator will have to work out, in detail, the relationship between the bus companies and the transit system, protecting the interests of the companies and their employees. He will have to meet and dispose of the absurd proposal for private ownership; one might as well talk of private ownership . . . of the sewers. [1]

The defeat of the 23 mile plan was taken without directions for change or amendment by the House. This, plus the size of the defeat, made it clear that the House would not pass a similar proposal unless there were some significant changes in the financial and operating parts of the plan.[2]

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[1] Editorial, Washington Post and Times Herald, December 11, 1963.

[2] The interpretation of congressional intention was originally made by Michael Lash, "Conflict in Rapid Transit Planning," p. 182, but is clearly evident in the debate on the proposal.

A Modified Rail System: 1965

Fourteen months after the defeat of the 23 mile plan, NCTA was ready to try again. This time, they were given authority to " . . . design, engineer, construct, equip and take other action . . ."[1] to insure the creation of a rapid rail transit system described in the report Rail Rapid Transit for the Nation's Capital.[2] The system described in the report was a 25 mile, $ 431 million rail system mainly within the District of Columbia, of which 13.1 miles was to be subway. On the surface the similarities between the 1963 and 1965 plans were greater than their differences, but the differences were sufficient to get the proposal through Congress. Physically the most noticeable change between the two was the rerouting of the Capital-Anacostia route to serve the area around D.C. stadium, the Armory, and D.C. General Hospital.[3] In effect this change served a more built up area of the city, assuring a better return per dollar of investment, but at the same time, it removed from direct service a large number of poor people.

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1 The National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, sec (3)(a), 79 Stat. 664(1966), 40 U.S.C.A. 682(1969).

2 U.S. National Capital Transportation Agency, Rail Rapid Transit for the Nation's Capital-Transit Development Program, 1965(Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965).

3 Ibid., p. 16.

Other changes in routing consisted of moving the Pentagon route up the Potomac so that the Pentagon, Pentagon City and Rosslyn could all be served by a single line instead of a line and branching operation as in the 1963 plan. The Union Station-Bowie, Maryland commuter line was eliminated from the plan entirely, and the Columbia Heights lines was extended from 18th Street and Columbia Road N.W. to the intersection of Georgia and New Hampshire Avenues N.W..[1]

The financial and organizational changes in the 1965 plan seemed more important from the congressional view than the route changes. A re-reading of the 1963 debate clearly shows opposition based on financial, organizational, and labor grounds; not on service levels or routes.

Of the $ 431 million capital cost of the system, the District of Columbia would be responsible for one-third of the revenue bond underwriting and one-third of the money raised by grants.[2] The 1963 financing plan called for 65 per cent of all financing to be done by revenue bonds with the Federal Government underwriting the entire amount, some $ 258 million.

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[1] Ibid., p. 18.

[2] Ibid., p. 25.

The remaining $ 141.7 million would have come from a $ 120 million Federal grant and a $ 21.7 million District grant. Obviously the result of all this was that the Federal Government's share was significantly lessened while the District of Columbia was required to assume a larger burden.[1]

Organizationally, the 1963 plan was silent on the matter of how the system should be operated. Sponsors of the 1963 legislation saw no problem in this and were willing to wait until construction was started before trying to solve this serious problem. Opponents attacked this stand as advocating a larger government role in traditional private functions. Thus the 1965 plan specifically required that the rail system ". . . not be operated except under contract by private transit companies, private railroads, or other private persons."[2]

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[1] A comparison between the 1963 and 1965 financing schemes is as follows:

	1963 (millions)		1965 (millions)	
	Federal	Dist. of Col.	Federal	Dist. of Col.
Bonds	$ 258.9	----	$ 222	$ 111
Grants	120.0	21.7	100	50
Total	378.0	21.7	322	161

[2] The National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, sec 3(b)(3), 79 Stat. 664(1966), 40 U.S.C.A. 682(1969).

It was further specified that before any operating contracts could be signed, any and all interested and qualified persons including private mass transit companies in the National Capital region be permitted to indicate an interest and bid on the service.

The above changes having been made, the legislation easily passed both houses by voice vote during the Summer of 1965.

At this stage in the evolution of METRO, Congress had approved a 25 mile subway system within the District but had not appropriated any funds for its actual construction. In fact, all that was given to NCTA was $6.1 million in supplemental appropriations for more detailed planning, specific plans for bond issuance, station location, and fare agreements with the local bus companies.

The Birth of WMATA: 1967

With the 25 mile system approved and funds available for its continued development, NCTA turned its attention to expanding the 25 mile system into a regional system serving the suburbs as well as the District of Columbia. Expansion of the system to include the suburbs could only be accomplished by interstate compact since parts of Maryland, Virginia, as well as the District were involved. The major activity of NCTA in late 1966 and early 1967 became the effectuation of such an interstate compact.

The legislation introduced[1] called for the creation of a Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority(WMATA) to plan, develop, finance, and provide for the operation of regional transit facilities, and to coordinate the operation of all public and privately owned transit facilities to arrive to a regional system.[2] Although there was some minor opposition, the compact legislation aroused no great opposition and easily passed both houses of Congress, as well as the governments of Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

For purposes of this research, two sections of the compact of are interest. The first, section fifty-one prohibits WMATA from operating any of the facilities or providing any of the supporting services, i.e. maintenance, on the transit system.[3] The compact, much like the 1965 legisilation, specifically required the operation of the rail system by private enterprise.

Article eighty-six gave the Authority the power to "expand the basic system authorized by the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965 into a regional system . . . ."[4]

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[1] U.S. Congress, Senate, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority Compact, 89th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1966, S. 3488.

[2] Ibid., article II, sec.2.

[3] Ibid., article XV, sec. 51.

[4] Ibid., article XVI, sec. 86(3)(c).

The effect of this provision was to require WMATA to accept the twenty-five mile adopted system as a "given" in its future planning. Only by new legislation could there be any modification of the 1965 system.

On September 30, 1967, the WMATA officially assumed responsibility from the NCTA for completing the basic system and for planning, constructing, and providing for the operation of a regional system. The Federally created NCTA passed out of existence.[1]

Modification of the Basic System:1967

In July, 1967, Rep. Basil Whitener(D-NC) introduced H.R. 11395, to amend the twenty-five mile basic system by eliminating the Columbia Heights spur and by adding service to the Independence Avenue-Southwest Washington, D.C. area.

The impetus for this change came ostensibly from the hearings on NCTA's 1966 budgetary requests. At those hearings members of the appropriations subcommittee expressed concern over the currency and technical sophistication of NCTA patronage and traffic estimates.[2]

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[1] The effect of transferring responsibility for the system from a Federal agency to an interstate compact was that the system was now "owned" by the people of the compact area and not the Federal Government.

[2] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the District of Columbia, Amend the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, Hearings, before subcommittee no. 4 of the Committee on the District of Columbia, House of Representatives, on H.R. 11395, 90th Cong., 1st Sess., 1967, p. 2.

The subcommittee directed the Agency to arrange for a patronage study by an outside contractor. Two significant findings resulted from the study. First, the Columbia Heights route[1] was found to be the weakest in terms of peak hour patronage,[2] producing an estimated 3100 passengers instead of the 6700 originally forecast.[3] This finding made the line economically not feasible, and its elimination was recommended by NCTA.

Second, the study showed that NCTA had overestimated the degree to which traffic congestion would be lessened due to the twenty-five mile system. The expanded Federal employment in southwest Washington, D.C. turned out to be a source of much patronage. Under the authorized system, rail users would ride to 12th and "G" Streets N.W. and then transfer to a bus to complete their journey. To serve the estimated patronage an estimated 120 buses would have to be on the streets during rush hour. The conclusion was obvious, traffic conditions in the downtown area would worsen instead of improve.

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[1] The Columbia Heights line is a spur off of the Connecticut Avenue line and serves north central Washington, D.C. via four stations at New Hampshire and Georgia Avenues N.W., 14th St. and Park Road N.W., 16th St. and Columbia Road N.W., and Belmost and Columbia Roads N.W..

[2] Peak hour patronage is for all purposes the journey-to-work, i.e. travel between the hours of 7-9 am and 4-6 pm.

[3] U.S. Congress, House, Hearings to Amend the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, p. 4.

The recommended change, it was argued, would effectively serve the gorwing employment sector south of Independence Avenue, estimated to be 87,000 by 1980. This modification was not an entirely new proposal as the eighty-three mile regional system rejected in 1962 included a line to the southwest that was similar to the alignment proposed here.

Reaction to the proposed changes was favorable during hearings held in the House and Senate. Supporters included eight local governing bodies, one regulatory group, nine planning agencies, two transit companies, and one labor union. The only governmental reservation expressed came from Walter N. Tobriner, President of the Board of Commissioners of the District. He expressed concern that the service to north central Washington would not exist unless the Columbia Heights or some other alternate route was included in the plan. However, given the assurance that regional plans called for some type of service between seventh and fourteenth streets, the District government supported the change in the authorized system.

The only real opposition to the elimination of the Columbia Heights line came from the citizens and groups of that area. In essence, the argument against the change was that by denying rail service to one of the poorest parts of the city would deprive the people of the inner city of access to jobs.

Reaction to the plan came on three fronts: an attack on the uneconomic assumptions of NCTA; an attack on the Voorhees study which led to the abandonment of the Columbia Heights line; and a plea against isolating central city residents from jobs and other opportunities, possibly leading to another Watts situation.

In its November, 1962 report, the NCTA estimated patronage rates of various income classes of individuals. They found that in low-income areas, 88 per cent of all travelers would use rail transit where auto and rail travel times were equal. But even more significantly, even where auto travel was six times faster than rail travel, 76 per cent of the low-income group would still use rail transit.[1] A poll taken by local businessmen in the Cardozo area showed that at least 74 per cent of those polled would use the Columbia Heights line five times or more per week, and only five per cent would never use the subway.[2] These two findings, according to Columbia Heights representatives, cast doubt on the NCTA assumptions that the line would not generate sufficient patronage to justify itself economically.

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[1] NCTA, Transportation in the National Capital, p. 58.

[2] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the District of Columbia, Amend the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, Hearings, before the Committee on the District of Columbia, Senate, on S. 2094 and H.R. 11395, 90th Cong., 1st Sess., 1967, p. 54.

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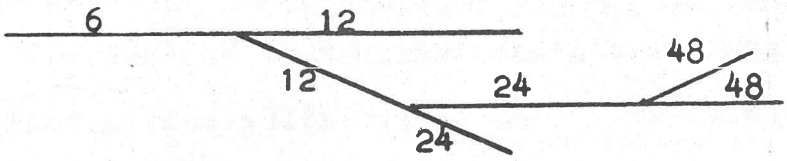
The technical findings on which was based the decision to abandon the line came from a study by Alan M. Voorhees and Associates of Washington, D.C.. Opponents argued that the study was biased against the Columbia Heights line since it was based on providing service only one-half as often as on the rest of the system. According to opponents of the change, if people in one part of the city have to wait twice as long for service as do people in other parts of the city, the first group will be less likely to use the service wherever they live. It must be pointed out that bias in this regard is due to the kind transit facilities serving the area and not due to bias on the part of the report. The key is that Columbia Heights was a branch line, and not a main route. Assuming that service on the main line was to be at six minute intervals, and assuming that equal service was to be provided to Columbia Heights and that part of the main line after the branching, then in no case could service be at less than twelve minute intervals. By changing the assumptions of equal service to only every third train going to Columbia Heights, the time between trains grows to eighteen minutes. Figure I shows the effect of branching on the frequency of service.

Figure I

Frequency of Service on a Branch Line



More important than this, is the whole nature of ghetto travel. The report based its findings on a comparison of rush hour traffic only. But the area served by the Columbia Heights line, according to area residents, has a higher proportion of non-rush hour traffic than the rest of the city because of the low-income shift workers who must travel at night.[1]

In a low-income area with a large number of people working shift or night work, there are fewer people who travel during the normal peak hours, thus the usual high patronage at peak hours does not materialize. Because of the nature of the employment, there is a wide spread of shifts. Thus, while there may be only 900 people using a rail system at eight in the morning, there may be 700 using it at midnight.[2]

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[1] U.S. Congress, House, Hearings to Amend the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, p. 66.

[2] Ibid.

Columbia Heights groups argued that closing the system at night when many low-income workers would be using it, and eliminating the Columbia Heights spur entirely, especially when the 1962 Report called for the Columbia Heights-Anacostia route to be built first,[1] clearly showed that NCTA had no understanding or concern for the problems or needs of ghetto residents.

The position of Columbia Heights groups can best be summarized by the following quote from the testimony of Chauncey Thomas of CHANGE Inc.:

> It seems clear to us that either your entire planning staff is incompetent, or your junking of our subway line was done for political reason that are not justified in terms of planning for the general public and the interests of the public.
>
> Traditionally, the use of public funds for a transportation system has been justified on the grounds that mass transit benefits blue-collar groups who otherwise could not afford transportation to employment or shopping centers. This is especially valid in this area, where racial segregation in housing prohibits many workers from living near their jobs. The decision to drop the Columbia Heights line for the Southwest line is surely an attempt to misuse public funds by suggesting a subway to benefit white suburbanites who can afford other means of transportation while leaving blue-collar Negro and Spanish resident of upper Cardozo to the mercy of inadequate, inconvenient, and expensive bus service.[2]

In answering these charges both NCTA and WMATA referred often to the congressional mandate that the system pay its own way.

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[1] NCTA, Transportation in the National Capital, p. 56.

[2] U.S. Congress, Senate, Hearings to Amend the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, p. 56.

The following exchange between McCarter(NCTA) and Rep. Whitener is illustrative:

> Whitener: Mr. McCarter, the testimony that you have given today . . . . would indicate that your decisions are being made on the basis of the intent of Congress that this system would be self-sustaining as nearly as possible and that the fare box carry the cost of the system.
>
> McCarter: I have taken that as my charge; yes.
>
> Whitener: And so while we may make arguments about desirability from the individual's point of view of having served his own community, I take it that you feel that you have no authority to be governed by that type of consideration ?
>
> McCarter: . . . I feel that I have no alternative as a professional other than to make this recommendation.
> . . . . . .
>
> Whitener: . . . We probably were able to sell it(to Congress) because of the engineering studies that we had and the projections which indicated that with grants of the local and federal governments that there could be a pay out of the fare box in a forty year period.
>
> McCarter: Yes.
>
> Whitener: If we get away from that concept then it seems to me that we are getting into trouble and maybe run the risk of having no subway system at all.[1]

Aided by the unanimous support of both District Committees, the modified plan easily passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law on December 20, 1967. It was only in the House that any mention at all was made of the realities of the problems that led to the Watts, Newark, and Detroit riots.

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[1] U.S. Congress, House, Amend the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, p. 61.

In a floor speech against the change, Rep. Bingham(D-NY) said:

> While the statistics presented by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority in support of its proposal seem persuasive, the fact remains that there will be no subway route servicing the low-income inner city area. In this time of urban discontent, when one of the chief problems is unemployment among ghetto residents, the unavailability of cheap, convenient mass transportation only aggravates the problem, it seems an inappropriate and impolitic moment to eliminate, the one subway line which would serve these people.[1]

A Regional System At Last: 1968

The final phase in our narrative begins in October, 1967, with the WMATA Board of Directors approving a Proposed Regional Rapid Rail Transit System(PRS) of 95.6 miles for presentation to the public. The system consisted of the 1965 25 mile system as modified in 1967, and seven branch lines to serve the Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

In considering various alternatives for the suburban part of the system, the Voorhees staff operated under the premise that the basic market for rail transit is peak hour use, and this is overwhelmingly the work trip.[2] Thus for the system to be successful, i.e. to operate in the black, it must be oriented to areas of population concentration at one end and concentrated employment on the other.

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[1] U.S. Congress, House, Rep. Bingham speaking against amending the National Capital Transportation Act of 1965, H.R. 11395, 90th Cong., 1st Sess., October 9, 1967, Congressional Record, CXIII, 28156.

[2] Robert L. Morris, Preliminary Regional System Planning Report, Remarks Made to the Board of Directors, WMATA(Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning & Finance, WMATA, April, 1967), p. 2.

In addition, the following kinds of questions were asked in discussing the abilities and limitations of rail rapid transit: (1) how far out from downtown will a significant number of people live who must work downtown, (2) how many non-downtown trips can be attracted to rail rapid transit, (3) and what quality of service can be provided to outlying areas using current technology.[1] Finally, how much service can be provided for non-downtown oriented trips ? Can rail transit carry a large number of people into suburban centers, and is this number large enough to justify extending transit lines beyond a point that downtown patronage alone would justify. ?[2]

Looking at these questions the Voorhees staff recommended three alternate systems to the WMATA based on previous route planning and projections for future development. All three systems provided essentially the same service to the region, but with each travel corridor being served differently by each alternative.

The results of the testing process were presented at a series of conferences held in July, 1967. Attending the meetings were representatives of all local governments in the region, local and regional planning agencies, and state and Federal governments.

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[1] Richard H. Pratt, Considerations in Rail Rapid Route Planning, Remarks Made to the Board of Directors, WMATA(Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning & Finance, WMATA, Feb., 1967), p. 2.

[2] Ibid., p. 5.

After two days of meetings and conferences, it was agreed that a fourth system should be tested. This alternative included rail transit service in all corridors with several alternate alignments in each corridor as possible improvements over the previously tested systems. The results of this test were presented at an October 20 conference held in Washington, D.C.. Following a presentation of the findings of the fourth test system, WMATA staff and officials unanimously recommended the PRS.

In sum, the Proposed Regional System was the result of ". . . intensive regional planning efforts where both technical and political considerations were weighted in arriving at the final decisions."[1]

Following the adoption of the PRS in October, a series of public hearings were held in Maryland, Virginia, and the District to elicit public response to the system. Two facts are noteworthy in discussing the public hearings on the PRS. The first is that as in the 1962 NCTA plan, the public was presented with a finished document. From all evidence available to this writer it appears that little or no effort was made to involve business, neighborhood, or citizen groups in the planning process. In fact, Richard H. Pratt, formerly with Voorhees stated that there was no real citizen participation in the planning process until the PRS was "trotted out."[2]

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[1] Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, Technical Report No. 1, System Planning (December, 1967), p.55.

[2] Richard H. Pratt, interview on January 2, 1970, Bethesda, Maryland.

The second item is that the ground rules established for testifying at the hearings were that only people who were residents of the jurisdiction in which the hearing was being held could testify at that hearing. In other words, only D.C. residents could testify at the D.C. hearings despite the interest of many suburbanites in the downtown service. Similarly no central city resident could testify at a suburban hearing even though he might work or own a business there.

This may appear to be a trivial if not insignificant point, but I would argue that it points to a significant degree of fragmentation in the conception of a regional system. Throughout its history, the benefits to the entire region were touted for the rail system, yet the first time any citizen input is permitted, regional considerations are ignored.

The system adopted on March 1, 1968 differed in some respects from the PRS. The original central city route up seventh street and then out to College Park was shifted to thirteenth street after the stop at 7th and "G" streets N.W.. It seems apparent that this change was secured after a meeting of the 14th Street Area Merchants Association with WMATA representatives.

Another changed involved the Southwest-Benning Raod route. Originally planned to serve the Capital Heights, Addison Road and Largo(route 495) area, the adopted system terminated the route at Addison Road, inside the Beltway and created a spur line on the Pennsylvania Railroad right-of-way providing service to Cheverly, Landover, and Ardmore, with a future extension to Bowie.

The Pentagon-Franconia route was changed.Service was extended to Huntington, south of Alexandria and the western end of the line was re-routed to serve Backlick Road and eventually Burke. Finally, the Wilson Boulevard route was changed to eliminate service to Vienna.

The Freeway Controversy and Final Approval: 1969

As 1969 came there still had not been one shovelfull of dirt turned for the rail system. The WMATA had proposed and the public had agreed on a regional rail system, with millions of dollars having been allocated for engineering, planning, and financial studies. But not one dollar had been released for actual construction.

In January, the President submitted his 1970 budget to Congress including $ 22.9 million for the District's contribution to construction costs. In June, the Senate by an 84 to 2 vote approved $ 18.7 million for construction in a 1969 supplemental appropriations bill. This item was subsequently deleted in conference.

Again, the reason was the District's failure to comply with the 1968 Highway Act and build the Three Sister's Bridge and the North Central Freeway. In 1966, 1968, and again in 1969, William Natcher, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Appropriations for the District of Columbia, refused to allow subway construction funds to be released until the freeway system got underway beyond recall.

On August 9, the D.C. City Council took the first step to resolve the impass. By a vote of six to two it reversed a previous stand and agreed to go ahead with the construction called for in the highway act. The Council meeting was not without its problems. Over 200 people, 14 of whom were arrested, attempted to break up the meeting and forced the Council to vote behind barricaded doors.

After the vote it was assumed that constructions funds would be forthcoming and work could finally begin. But on Augst 11, Mr. Natcher announced a new condition for the release of the funds: the city must win all lawsuits pending against the Three Sisters Bridge.[1] The reaction of District officials was immediate and predictable. City Council Chairman Gilbert Hahn Jr. said he was "disappointed" with Natcher's remarks and that he had been led to believe that the Council's action would secure the release of the subway funds.[2]

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[1] Washington Post & Times Herald, August 12, 1969, p. A1.

[2] Ibid.

Council Vice-Chairman Sterling Tucker was more direct; he labeled the statement a "doublecross."[1]

In a surprise move a month later Mr. Natcher announced that he was releasing almost $ 121 million in METRO funds, including $ 18.7 million in city funds and $ 37.4 million in Federal contributions. Although there was no reason given why the sudden change occurred, a Washington Post article noted that Natcher had been under considerable pressure from the White House, members of Congress, and the community at large to release the funds.[2] An apparent key factor was the decision of the Senate District Committee to keep in the City's pending budget request a rider which would cancel the city's annual Federal contribution if it failed to comply with the provisions of the 1968 Highway Act.[3]

The rest of the evolution proceeded uneventfully. In May, the Secretary of Transportation and Commissioner of the District of Columbia submitted to Congress legislation authorizing Federal participation in a 97 mile regional system approved by WMATA. In June, joint hearings were held the House and Senate District Committees with both favorably reporting the legislation.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., September 25, 1969, p. A 13.

[3] Ibid.

The House vote on November 24, dramatically reversed the278-76 defeat of the 1963 plan as the regional system was passed 285 to 23.

Finally, in December, President Nixon signed the legislation into law and official groundbreaking ceremonies were held on the same day. Finally the National Capital area had a subway. Currently it is several holes in the ground, but by 1980 WMATA anticipates that the entire regional system will be operating barring any further problems.